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St Francis of Assisi: Meat Eater?

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Abstract

Francis of Assisi is often supposed to have been vegetarian by both modern commentators on his life and the people among whom he lived. In fact, texts show he ate meat on various occasions. As a guest, Francis would not refuse meat if offered it, and when he himself received guests normal dietary practices were sometimes disrupted. Sickness was a second reason for exemptions from normal dining practices, and Francis made personal use of these as part of a wider effort to oppose pressures within the order from brothers seeking to impose more rigorous discipline. There was also a danger that rigid abstention from meat might identify the Franciscan order too closely with heretical sects. In general, Francis's eating practices need to be understood in terms of his hierarchical view of creation, according to which everything praises God but is also available for human use and consumption.

Hagiography is alive and well in present-day Western society, and nowhere is this truer than in the modern legends that have grown up around Francis of Assisi (1182–1226). He is commonly regarded in churches and society as the patron saint of animals and the environment, living in peaceful harmony with nature and the prototypical advocate of animal rights, ecological living, vegetarianism and general radicalism. These images need to be probed in greater depth in order to recover a truer understanding of the man behind the image.¹ For instance, Francis preached to animals, but also ate them. In this essay I will focus on his dietary discipline as a means of developing a more accurate picture of his theological understanding of animals and the wider natural world.

Francis's dietary practice is informed by scripture. He follows Jesus's instruction to his disciples in Luke's Gospel that 'when you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you' (10:8). If a guest in another's home, Francis is willing to eat foods from which he would otherwise abstain. When welcomed into the house of a Christian in

¹ This task has been made easier by the recent publication of Francis's collected works (1999–2002). References cited in the text are all to this collection. For a convenient list of various food references see Sorrell 1988: 76.

Lombardy, Francis accepts his host's invitation to 'eat of everything set before him, in observance of the holy gospel', including capon (chicken) on toast. (III:50)

What happens next shows that even during Francis's lifetime the wider public did not expect him to eat meat. During the meal, a man arrives at the door pretending to be a beggar and Francis gives him a piece of the chicken. The following day, the beggar appears at Francis's sermon and seeks to disrupt it by producing the gift in front of the crowd in order to cast doubt on the saint's holiness. Francis's behaviour would have contradicted the people's expectations on two counts. Members of the traditional religious orders were expected to abstain from meat, and the more relaxed practices of the new 'mendicant' Franciscan and Dominican orders would have seemed strange. Moreover, Francis was well-known for his kinship with animals, displayed in events like his sermons to birds, freeing of animals caught in traps, and releasing of fish from nets (I:234–5). The beggar's ploy backfires, however, when the chicken appears to the crowd miraculously not as chicken but as fish. The beggar, instead of undermining Francis, ends up praising his holiness and sanctity. The chicken is later restored, again miraculously, to its real appearance.

A story of Julian of Speyer states that Francis, when offered meat as a guest, would 'put his hand to his mouth, appearing to be eating the meat, but rarely tasting even a little bit of it, he would unobtrusively put the rest in his lap' (I:392). This suggests that Francis felt uneasy about eating large amounts of meat, and that the principal object of indulging when a guest was acceptance of hospitality and not exploitation of the freedom which the status of guest allowed by eating greedily.

The reverse question also arose of how guests in Franciscan houses should be treated. At least one account indicates that more than the usual fare could be provided for visitors. Francis invites his ophthalmologist to dine, and the doctor, knowing the brothers' poverty, reluctantly accepts. As their meal begins, a woman arrives with a present for Francis comprising, among other items, fish and crabcakes, which he gladly accepts and shares (III:359). Occasions of hospitality should not, however, become an occasion for greed. To guard against this, Francis made a constitution that the brothers should take no more than three morsels of meat when dining with laymen (Brooke 1959: 157).

Sickness was another reason to relax normal dietary practices. Francis was frequently ill, suffering from bleeding (the stigmata) and eye infections among other ailments. Once, when he was being nursed at the palace of the bishop of Assisi, the brothers were encouraging him to take some food but he responded that the only item he would eat was squali (a type of sea fish). These were then brought to him, along with crabcakes, and he consumed them (II:174). This episode occurred during a fast, for the

breaking of which Francis subsequently performs public penance. Another time, following a sermon preached while suffering the later effects of malarial fever, Francis dramatically confesses to the people that during his illness he had eaten meat (II:182; cf. I:228, 392, 478). On a third occasion, he confesses to the crowd at the beginning of a sermon that during the Advent fast he had eaten food cooked in lard, prepared for him by the brothers 'because oil was very bad for him in his illnesses' (II:183).

Francis did not seek exemptions only for himself in case of sickness, begging for meat to take to other sick brothers (II:146; III:288). This dual standard was accepted practice in the Rule of Benedict, which commands: 'Let the use of fleshmeat be granted to the sick who are very weak; but, as soon as they are better, let all abstain from fleshmeat as usual.' (36) It is curious that Francis makes elaborate confessions of guilt in cases when he is himself recipient, yet offers meat to fellow brothers living under the same rule as himself. He was continually seeking to combat the personality cult which arose around him, yet the spectacular character of his public penances had arguably the opposite effect.

The 1221 Rule for the Franciscan order, produced two years before Francis's death, prescribes the days on which fasting is required in the order. It states of the brothers:

Let them fast from the feast of All Saints until the Lord's Nativity. May those be blessed by the Lord who fast voluntarily during that holy Lent that begins at the Epiphany and lasts during the forty days which our Lord consecrated by His own fast; but those who do not wish to keep it will not be obliged. Let them fast, however, during the other [Lent] until the Lord's Resurrection. At other times they may not be bound to fast except on Fridays. During a time of obvious need, however, the brothers may not be bound by corporal fast... According to the holy Gospel, let them eat whatever food is set before them. (I:102)²

An interesting practical question arises over whether the usual Friday fast should be observed on Christmas Day. One year when the two coincide, Francis proclaims: 'I want even the walls to eat meat ... and if they cannot, at least on the outside they be rubbed with grease!' (II:374) He goes on to express his desire that the whole creation celebrate Christ's nativity through feasting: the poor being fed by the rich, oxen and asses given extra feed and hay, and birds fed by wheat and grain strewn along the roads by all persons of sufficient means.

Attempts to establish stricter abstinence in the order than that imposed by the Rule were being made even during Francis's lifetime. In one narrative, an angel appears to

² This passage shows that the term 'Lent' has in the past been used to designate different fasting periods and not just the one falling immediately before Easter.

Brother Elias, vicar of the order, to chastise him for making a constitution which entirely prohibited meat consumption (III:573). In fact, Elias issued no such instruction, and the account is created by his detractors following his deposition as vicar (Brooke 1959: 102–3). What the story does demonstrate, however, is the existence of a rigorist tendency within the order, and that eating was a key area of conflict. More restrictive local practices were, indeed, introduced while Francis was away in the Holy Land. A chapter of ‘certain older brothers of Italy’ convened to prescribe fasting on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays with abstention from dairy products required on Saturdays (III:399). Brothers were permitted on other days to eat meat although not to procure it by their own efforts: all meat they consumed had to be the free offering of the faithful. These practices were permitted by Francis, but he did not sanction the attempts to make them obligatory.

It is important to recognize the doctrinal context of these food debates. Meat abstention was intrinsic to the life of humility, poverty and moderation enjoined on the friars in emulation of the life of Christ, but was also an indicator of heresy if pursued to extremes (Bazell 1997: 90–2). This tension has been apparent since the advent of monastic rules in the fourth century (De Vogüé 1964–5: II, 247) but surfaced again in Francis’s day as a result of the teaching of the Cathar sect. Cathars believed the material world to be intrinsically evil as created by an evil power, and their elite (*perfecti*) observed complete abstention from anything born of coition on the grounds that this act was a transgression of the proper boundary between fallen materiality and the pure spiritual realm (Esser 1958). There was a danger that total meat abstinence would be seen as an indicator of membership of a heretical group, for which penalties could be severe. This is an additional reason why Francis advocates reduced meat eating rather than complete elimination of meat from the diet.

Francis preached to birds, as already observed, but also to inanimate objects. Thomas of Celano states: ‘Fields and vineyards, rocks and woods, and all the beauties of the field, flowing springs and blooming gardens, earth and fire, air and wind: all these he urged to love of God and to willing service.’ (I:251) Some of these places and objects produced or included basic foodstuffs which would have formed the basis of his diet. It cannot be assumed in Franciscan cosmology therefore that the hearer of a sermon is not also a potential source of food! The same is true of disciples of Francis: St Anthony of Padua, the ‘Hammer of the heretics’ (*Malleus hereticorum*), preached to fish but probably also ate them (III: 519–21, 632–3). James Long argues persuasively that Francis espoused an essentially Thomist notion of the hierarchical ordering of creation, including a ‘rich variety among created beings, each reflecting some different perfection of the infinite

Creator' (Long 2005: 56). This is the correct theological cosmology within which to situate his theology of creation. It is relational, but also subordinates some elements to others.

Misconceptions about Francis's food practices and the reasons for them existed even during his lifetime. The modern association of Francis with animal rights and vegetarianism has generated further confusion. This essay has sought to resituate the questions historically with reference to the key themes of hospitality, care for the sick, doctrine and catholicity. In these contexts, eating is a complex practice because it is a means to other theological ends, and therefore of great theological significance.

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